Theresa Stern: Welcome to Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm Theresa Stern, and I'm your host. Hello everyone and welcome to Central Bark. Today we have another special episode for you. As many of you know, none of the amazing work that we do here at Guide Dogs for the Blind would be possible without our amazing donors. Amazing donors make amazing work. So today we thought we'd take some time and catch up a little bit with Larry Meisner, who is our Chief Philanthropic Officer here at Guide Dogs for the Blind, to tell us a little bit about how all of that works. So welcome, Larry.

Larry Meisner: Thank you, Theresa. It's a pleasure to be here.

Theresa Stern: So glad to have you.

Larry Meisner: Thank you.

Theresa Stern: So Larry, you've been with us now for two years.

Larry Meisner: Yeah, actually a little over two years. Time flies.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, it goes so fast. Oh my gosh. So tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to be part of the GDB community.

Larry Meisner: Sure, sure. So I've been working in the nonprofit space or in nonprofit fundraising for about 25 years now, I cannot believe how long that's been. Prior to Guide Dogs for the Blind, and you mentioned that I've been here a little over two years, I worked for two best in class health nonprofits, and so was thrilled about the opportunity at yet another best in class organization, guide Dogs to the Blind. And what brought me here is when I started working in the nonprofit space, I was really moved by the impact that the work that I was doing with others on a very large team, how that was impacting the lives of individuals who are benefiting from the mission.

Theresa Stern: Right, right.

Larry Meisner: And as a dog lover and one who had dogs most of my life, I've seen their impact on humans, on me. That human canine bond is just extraordinary and such intelligent, intuitive beings they are. So when this opportunity presented itself, I actively pursued it knowing that here I have an opportunity to influence a mission if I could. One that's been around for 80 plus years in a positive way and take all that I've learned and all the passion that I have about helping humans and connecting them with dogs and seeing how it all worked out. And I'm thrilled to say that I've been here and so far, knock on wood, worked out really, really well.

Theresa Stern: Yes, it has. We're very lucky to have you. And I can attest to Larry's love for dogs because my guide dog, Wills, whenever we're near his office, he starts to get all excited because he might get a cookie from Uncle Larry. And there's a couple other dogs that run straight into your office, Larry. So you definitely have the dog whisperer charm going on for sure.

Larry Meisner: I think we all have a little of that, but yeah.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. Well, very good. So some people know, and some people don't know, that Guide Dogs for the Blind is fully funded by private donations, that we don't take any government funding, and people often kind of want to know why that is, Larry. So can you kind of give us some insights on that?

Larry Meisner: Yes. And the answer has layers, Theresa, as most answers do.

Theresa Stern: Everything does.

Larry Meisner: Everything has layers.

Theresa Stern: It's like a chocolate cake.

Larry Meisner: I don't know if this is as delicious an answer, but nonetheless, yes. So from an organizational standpoint, guide dog training and guide dog placement actually does not qualify for governmental support because guide dogs in that context are not considered essential such as a white cane is considered essential.

Theresa Stern: Gotcha. Okay.

Larry Meisner: So from not even qualifying on the other end is actually good that we don't qualify because when one does depend on governmental support, with that comes restrictions, certain guidelines that have to be followed, and also the unreliability of year over year funding. One can never count, so it's very hard to budget. So by relying on private donations, yes that could make it more challenging, but it also gives us an opportunity to not only connect more deeply with our community, but also to be able to execute on our mission in exactly the way we need to to provide the best in class programs and services that we do.

Theresa Stern: Right, right. That totally makes sense. Having myself come from past nonprofits where we did have government funding, you never knew from year to year a new administration comes in and a whole program goes away. So I think having that stability is so important, especially to this program where we're really sort of offering a lifetime of support.

Larry Meisner: Exactly. Exactly.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And speaking of donations, this is always such a hot topic for any nonprofit, what percentage of a donation that an individual or a company makes to Guide Dogs for the Blind, what percentage of that actually goes to the programs?

Larry Meisner: Yeah, another important question. And I'm going to speak a little bit in fundraising terms and development terms because it's important to point out that non-profit organizations are actually assessed not only by all of their donors, but by charity watchdog groups like Charity Navigator on how the donor dollars are spent, on how they are functionally allocated to mission. And Guide Dogs for the Blind is highly rated. We have a four-star rating on Charity Navigator, that is the highest rating in an organization-

Theresa Stern: Is it? Awesome.

Larry Meisner: ... Can achieved. Yeah. And actually 100% score. And for that Guide Dogs is credited for actually spending the most amount of money on program delivery. So if we want to actually break it down, we spend nearly 80% on our program delivery, on our mission delivery. That's an incredible figure. Actually in FY '24, our last fiscal year, we were looking at a 78% functional allocation or functional spending of donor dollars on program delivery. The remainder is 8% on administrative and management, which is very low, and then 14% on fundraising expenses. So we are doing exceedingly well, and that's how donor dollars are spent. We are very mindful that we're very efficient and effective with our spending.

Theresa Stern: Wow, That's great. And I know since you've joined the team, and you have an amazing team, you've got a great team of people, you guys have come up with some new and different unique ways for people to get involved and get connected with Guide Dogs for the Blind and help out a little bit. Can you tell us about a few of those?

Larry Meisner: Yeah. So one of our newest ways is... Well, again, the context of this, the genesis is that we want to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate in supporting our mission. Not everyone can donate of their own resources at the same level, but everyone can have the opportunity to fundraise on behalf of the mission and reach out to their friends and family to support Guide Dogs for the Blind, an organization that means so much to them.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Larry Meisner: So we launched an online fundraising platform, we're calling it Fundraise for PAWSitive Impact, and-

Theresa Stern: As P-A-W-S, right?

Larry Meisner: P-A-W-S, exactly.

Theresa Stern: It's so clever, Larry, I like it. I like it.

Larry Meisner: And it provides a variety of opportunities for anyone to easily sign up and to start fundraising in a few short minutes and a few short clicks. It's actually a very common way for nonprofit organizations to open up fundraising opportunities and donation opportunities to a much larger audience. And we are able to do this as are in delivering our mission throughout the US and Canada.

Theresa Stern: Wow, that's great. Because I know just from going through the Guide Dog program myself and talking to other people who've graduated with a Guide dog, I know a lot of people are like, "How can I get involved?" And I think before we put this sort of together, it's a little tricky. Maybe they don't live close by or different things like that that might make it easier for them to come in and help, but this is a way they can do it actually from your own home, right?

Larry Meisner: Yeah, exactly. From your own home. And for those who are closer and, Theresa, you are often the host of these fundraising events, and we have a very significant event coming up. Will be here before we know it, even though it's on December 13th, our 48th holiday luncheon fundraiser. An event I'm sure you're very familiar with, Theresa-

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Larry Meisner: ... And very important to us. So people do come in from a bit of a distance. It really does attract a more local crowd. And this one, a very large crowd from, I understand, I've not participated in a holiday luncheon, but it's hundreds, I think 600 big. It's huge. Yeah.

Theresa Stern: It's huge. And it's such a great way to kick off the holiday sort of time because it's down in downtown San Francisco, right?

Larry Meisner: Yes. It's at the St. Francis Hotel.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Yeah. So absolutely beautiful. I totally encourage anyone who happens to be around or want to come up. I think we've got some hotel room blocked too, if you're from out of town. And it's great fun to bring a friend and really just kick off the holidays with that and do a little shopping while you're at Union Square. Got to get that too.

Larry Meisner: Of course. Of course.

Theresa Stern: And help out guide Dogs for the Blind. So yeah, definitely a fun event and so nice that we can do it in person again this year right? After COVID and all of that, so.

Larry Meisner: Yeah. People are still anxious and hungry to get together and, again, share in that community. So yeah, it'll be a wonderful event. We're excited to be planning it.

Theresa Stern: Very good. I think there's a Giving Tuesday coming up as well?

Larry Meisner: Yeah. So even before that, so September is National Guide Dog Month, and as part of our creative efforts, we're always looking for new ways to raise money and raise awareness. We're actually going to have a special day of Giving, Dog Day of Giving.

Theresa Stern: Dog day of Giving.

Larry Meisner: We're constantly tying it in, Theresa. And that's taking place on September 25th. So in addition to the entire month being National Guide Dog Month, we're going to have a special day of giving, which is very similar to what you stated moments ago on Giving Tuesday, which is the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, which is another historically large online fundraising day for us, Guide Dogs for the Blind, as well as other nonprofits. So we're looking forward to September and seeing how that rolls out and hopefully of what's the first annual day of giving.

Theresa Stern: I love that, Dog Day. I love, that's so cool. I love it. Dog day's of summer, dog day's [inaudible 00:12:19]. That's really good. Good one. Very good. Well, I know we all read the news, and inflation is certainly one of the headlines, and I'm sure that the costs for all the great stuff that we do at Guide Dogs for the Blind are going up, up, up just like everywhere else. How does that affect your job and the expectations that are placed on you and your department?

Larry Meisner: It's stressful. I can't deny that because we can't control inflation.

Theresa Stern: Right.

Larry Meisner: Costs of doing business will inevitably increase. But from a fundraising or a development department standpoint, we have an obligation to align with those increasing costs. And provide a strong enough case for support that even within an inflationary environment, people are still inspired to give, to give as much as they can. So it's really important for us and incumbent upon us to make certain that that meaningful and thoughtful messaging is carried out, especially in our direct response or our mass communication efforts, that we understand what's going on, and we understand that there are many needs that a household faces.

Theresa Stern: Of course.

Larry Meisner: We want you to stay engaged with Guide Dogs to the Blind in whatever way that you can. So we're constantly working with inflationary situations and with rising costs rather than against them, because otherwise you're fighting them. You can't establish a win situation in that environment. So we're always modifying and adapting to a changing economic environment to keep our mission and our organization top of mind, to make sure that our innovative growth is made aware to people and resonates. And that we do, like the online fundraising and Day of Giving, provide new and other opportunities for people to engage and for people to give. Our mission is so important to so many people that these inflationary times have been occurring for quite some time now, and the generosity of our donors is truly extraordinary. They stick with us. They're determined and dedicated to work through these more challenging or even unknown times. And so it's important that we work with them to make certain that we create a win-win situation for everyone involved.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. And I just want to also put my own personal shout out to our donors, folks from all over and at all levels, I think that's what makes Guide Dogs so strong in so many ways, is that there's so many people that are connected to the mission and they give what they can. I find it heartwarming. I don't know about for you, that's got to feel good for you, as in your position to realize that all those people that are giving, they've been touched, their heart's been touched by what we do, and you've been able to bring that message to them. So that's be pretty amazing. Yeah.

Larry Meisner: Absolutely. It's an incredible feeling. Again, as you stated, based upon the generosity, and also to provide a shout out for our planned giving donors, those who leave us in their estate plans. What I've experienced, unlike the other organizations I worked at, which were larger in size and scope, but not larger in the generosity year over year of our plan giving donor community, it truly is extraordinary. Not only are people involved in a very rich and wonderful way during their lifetimes, but they leave us in their legacy plans. So that love and that connection carries on, and it truly, truly is extraordinary. Guide Dogs for the Blind has an extraordinary supporter base.

Theresa Stern: You're making me teary. It's true. It's very true. For folks who are listening that aren't as connected to the community as some of our other folks, how would they sort of get connected, Larry, with you and your team, and figure out how they can be a part of this great community?

Larry Meisner: Well, absolutely. Anyone can reach out to me directly if they have a question or just want to talk about our fundraising efforts. And you could reach out to me through email at lmeisner@guidedogs.com. That's M-E-I-S-N-E-R. First initial, Larry, L. And if you are interested in learning more about Guide Dogs for the Blind or ways to give, you can visit our website, which has a plethora of information at guidedogs.com. And right at the top of the screen, you'll see ways to give. There are details there as well. That's, I think, probably the best ways if people want to learn more.

Theresa Stern: That's awesome. That's great. Well, Larry, I want to say thank you for being here, and thank you for doing the job that you do because without you and your team, none of this would be possible, so thank you so much.

Larry Meisner: Well, thank you, Theresa. And not only thank you for staying connected to Guide Dogs for the Blind after so many years, you are iconic at GDB, and we're so thrilled. And as you said, I just want to end, it's not about us, the staff, we're facilitators, it really is about the individuals like yourself who are clients and guide dog handlers, others who are participating in our other core programs, and it's the donors and the volunteers who make this organization run and run so wonderfully. And for that, I'll be and will be forever grateful, so thanks for having me. Appreciate it.

Theresa Stern: Thanks. You have to come by sometime again for another Central Bark. Yes.

Larry Meisner: Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. I would be happy to. Thank you.

Theresa Stern: Thank you for tuning into Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. If you enjoyed today's broadcast, please hop on over to Apple Podcasts and leave us a five-star review. Your reviews help more people find our podcast, and learn about GDB's life-changing mission. We also love it when you leave us notes. As always, if you have an idea for an episode or a question you'd like us to answer on our podcast, please send us an email at podcast@guidedogs.com. We love hearing from you, so head over to guidedogs.com/podcasts where you can find recordings of previous episodes along with show notes and transcripts.